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ABSTRACT

The main barriers to teenage reading are lack of reading skills, lack of reading materials, and lack of time for reading. The school has often unconsciously contributed to the teenager's not reading by overloading him with homework and providing too many after-school activities. Another important factor that affects the child's attitude toward reading is that many people around him do not read. Our goal is not to see that the child merely reads words on a page, but to develop in him a positive attitude and genuine interest in reading. In order to achieve this, the child should be provided a comfortable, quiet reading environment. If the child is deficient in reading skills, parents might examine the possibility of a school remedial reading class or a qualified tutor. To improve the child's attitude towards reading, parents should develop in themselves a reading habit. Pairing films with books and discussions among the family about materials read are good motivational techniques. Bibliography can be used to solve teenage problems, but must be approached sensitively. Encourage the child to read what interests him, but make good books available so that good taste might develop naturally. This micromonograph is one of a series for parents about children's reading development. References are included. (AW)

# How can I get my teenager to read?

An ERIC/CRIER + IRA Micromonograph
by Rosemary Winebrenner

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Kevin hates to read. Cleaning the tropical fish tank is a joy compared to sitting down with a book. Although Kevin's intelligence is above average, his schoolwork has always been poor because he never learned to read well. Now no amount of urging from his parents makes reading seem like anything but punishment.

Sarah doesn't read either, but for different reasons. Until she entered high school, she brought books home from the library in stacks. When her parents ask why she has stopped reading, she dashes out the door calling, "I just don't have time! See you later!" Occasionally Sarah glances at the latest issue of a teen fashion magazine, but the only books she reads are those for school. Why?

Why do many high school students stop reading? Why do others never pick up the reading habit? These questions are not so simple as they might seem. In fact, the answers are probably as numerous as the children about whom they are asked. Nevertheless, it

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is important that we find some answers that apply generally. The parent must make an accurate diagnosis of the cause before he can expect to remedy the problem.

Two difficulties which plague a number of adolescents who might otherwise read are lack of reading skills and reading materials. Even the smallest amount of reading is thwarted by these circumstances. When the adolescent has nothing immediately available to read or when reading is so difficult that it becomes work, he is likely to adopt a "Why bother?" attitude.

You may point out that no healthy child really lacks something to read. And you're right. Certainly the libraries are full of books, and paperback racks are everywhere. But these sources may not capture the attention of the reluctant reader. To get library books, he must take a special trip to borrow them and another to return them. To obtain paperbacks, he must spend money. To make this effort, he must be interested in books, and by definition the nonreader is not interested. In consequence, these "easily available" materials go unread.

Like Kevin, students who read poorly go out of their way to avoid reading. Books are fun only if they are not difficult, and leisure time reading should be fun. After all, how many adults read philosophy texts on their lunch hour? School provides most teens with more than enough to study, and more than encouragement is needed to make reading attractive to them.

A second group of barriers to teenage reading can be included under the heading "lack of time." Here we find problems caused by homework, school activities, nonschool clubs and lessons, and part-time jobs. Sometimes adolescents, like Sarah, become involved with so many things that they actually can't find a large enough segment of time to enjoy a book. Their interest in reading is crowded out by other obligations or interests.

It may seem strange to say that schools sometimes encourage poor reading habits in teenagers. Certainly they do not intend to have that effect. Nevertheless, no matter how reasonable the homework load may be, it is invariably too much for some students. Jeanne, for example, is accurate but very slow.

During the week, she seldom has a free evening. David's problem is not that he is slow, but that he worries needlessly about grades. He could finish in an average amount of time, but he spends countless hours checking math problems, rereading social studies assignments, and rewriting English papers. Like Jeanne, he is overjoyed to see Friday arrive so he can leave books behind. He regrets his lack of outside reading, but his friends are important to him too. His weekends are spent with people, not books.

School contributes to the teenager's activity dilemma by offering a multitude of clubs in addition to the usual interschool round of athletics. Most of the time devoted to such activities takes place after school hours, and some students, such as those involved in school newspapers or sports, spend almost as many hours at school at night as during the day. No one would debate that this is not a valuable part of adolescence, but like anything else, it can be overdone.

Older teenagers, especially boys, find that their time is taken up by evening and weekend jobs. They have many expensive reasons for wanting to supplement

## *Reading gets crowded out*

their allowance, and parents are usually glad to see that their child has enough ambition to find and keep a job. But too-long hours at a gasoline pump or a checkout lane in a grocery have disastrous effects on many activities, including reading.

And finally, just as school activities and jobs can become too time-consuming, so can the dancing lessons, guitar lessons, Girl Scouts, or theater groups which active teens plunge themselves into. If an adolescent seems busy and insists that he has no time to read, he may well be telling the truth. A parent's urging him to read won't have much effect if he has other commitments.

The final blow to the reading interest of many adolescents is dealt by the people around them, the people who do not read. Most of us like to feel that we are part of a group. Teenagers are especially concerned with being accepted and liked, and those who face the possibility of being called fools for wasting their time on books have a real problem. The casualty resulting from such a confrontation will probably be reading. The respect of friends becomes much more desirable than any book.

The effect of parents who do not read is not so obvious, but it is just as powerful. The teenager who has grown up in a home where everyone watches television and reads little except the newspaper is at a disadvantage. He may use his parents as an excuse for failing to read. The high school student fast approaching adulthood tells himself, "They don't read, and they're doing okay, so why should I bother?" He can ignore all their admonitions about his reading; after all, he knows they don't follow their own advice. Alternatively, he may never think to read for enjoyment since his parents don't. Either way, the outcome is the same—nonreading.

These problems may have sounded familiar to you, but you may still be saying, "Sure, Jim has some of those problems; so why doesn't he pay any attention to me when I tell him to quit working at the gas station until ten o'clock?" "Why can't I convince Susie that six clubs are too many?"

The truth of the matter is that the problems of the adolescent are greater than just part-time jobs, too many school activities, or even poor reading skills. The adolescent is attempting to become an adult; it

requires most of his time and patience, as well as that of his parents. Being part of the crowd is very important to him but so is independence. As a child, he was told what to do by his parents; as an adult, he will have to become independent; as an adolescent, he is caught in the resulting conflict. It is no wonder that he is confused.

Many times parents already know *why* their child doesn't read. They try to show him why reading is important, but he just doesn't listen. He rejects every suggestion they hopefully toss in his direction. Part of this attitude is related to the need for independence, and part of it may be that the other "unimportant" things are supremely important to him for the moment. Sometimes social life will be more crucial than anything found in a book, and the parent may have to accept that fact. At other times action is indicated. What began as a stage in growing up might otherwise turn into a permanent habit of nonreading.

With the causes of nonreading in mind, we can better approach the question, "How can I get my teenager to read?" You as a parent must also remind yourself that your goal is not merely to see your child reading words on a page. It is to develop in him the attitude that reading is fun, relaxing, a good way to learn something. For this reason, many schemes must be dismissed because they will produce hostility toward reading and create more problems than they solve. Many parents have already discovered that forcing their teenager to read may elicit page-turning, but the only learning that occurs is that books are dull and that parents should be boiled in oil for making someone read them. So you must tread lightly around the prickly adolescent's struggle for independence, while making reading so enticing that your child wonders why he never thought of it himself.

Some of the conditions most necessary for a teenager to become involved in reading are those most simple for you as a parent to provide. For example, noisy surroundings lead an adolescent to add to the confusion by doing active things. To read comfortably, it helps to have a certain amount of quiet. Just as it is often emphasized that studying is improved by having a comfortable spot in which to do it, reading is also enhanced by a moderately quiet

## *If you read, so will they*

environment. You might find that your teenager is helped simply by making sure that he can read in his own room without being disturbed. Younger brothers and sisters should be persuaded to leave him alone when he is reading. If more straightforward measures of noise control are needed, it might be necessary to regulate television and stereo volumes or the time periods in which they may be used. These rules should be flexible, changing with the needs of the family.

Parents should also be aware that they may disrupt children by poor timing of household duties. If Tom is reading a magazine, only to be called to wash the car, and later to mow the lawn, he may lose interest in the article. The problem here is not that Tom is expected to help, but that his work should be scheduled in a particular time period, not scattered out. When he does sit down to read, he should be able to concentrate without interruption.

If teenagers are obviously deficient in their reading skills, parents might examine the possibility of a school remedial reading class or a qualified tutor. All the threats and encouragement in the world will do

nothing to make an enthusiastic reader out of a student who is unable to read material at his interest level. Parents should try not to compound the problem through harassment but to begin working immediately to solve it.

Since nonreading parents contribute to a lack of reading interest in their children, it follows that parents who read will have a positive effect on their children. Ideally, books should always have been a part of the parents' life. If this hasn't been the situation, parents must proceed cautiously. Obviously, they cannot suddenly begin spending every spare minute at the library or subscribing to a dozen magazines. But even a small change may be beneficial if it is motivated by an honest interest. Teenagers are quick to notice artifice in others, but they usually respond to sincerity. In addition to being exposed to others who are interested in reading, it means a great deal that those people should be adults. Reading is enhanced if it does not appear to be a childish pastime.

If parents have materials around that they are reading, the high schooler should be able to find some things among them that interest him too. However, interests and tastes may not always mesh, and it is useful to leave a book or two lying in the living room that might catch the eye and imagination of a teenager. Although parents already know the probable reading preferences of their teenager, there are some general guidelines which can be drawn from research. High school boys read adventure, mystery, sports, humor, and sea stories. Girls enjoy romance, humor, careers, and adventure. A good librarian can point out a popular section of books or a particular author. If the choice is a good one, what began as curiosity may develop into active interest. Then the adolescent is on his own.

Another kind of attention-getter is the pairing of films and the books or plays from which the screenplay was written (or vice-versa). *Gone With the Wind* is a classic example; *Pygmalion* (*My Fair Lady*), *Love Story*, and *2001: A Space Odyssey* are more recent hits. An exciting motion picture may provide the impetus needed for a reluctant reader to get into a book. This method would be especially valuable for a below-average reader because he has knowledge of

the plot before he reads. His difficulties are minimized, since he knows what is happening even when he cannot read every word.

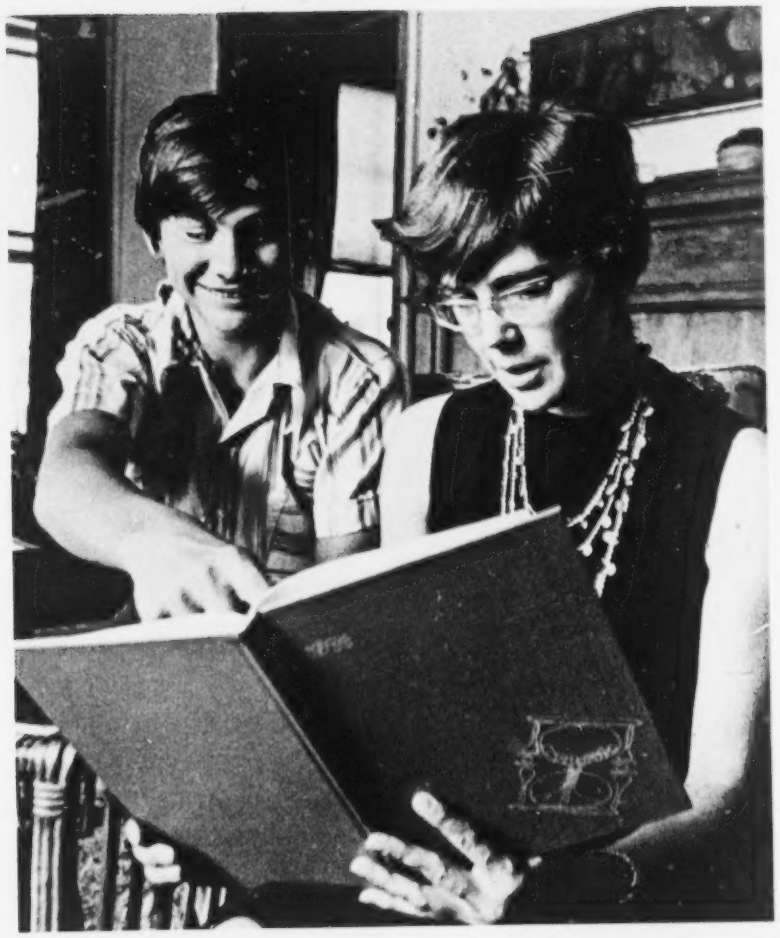
Just as pairing films and books can help solve some reading problems for teenagers, pairing the experiences of characters with those of adolescents can help solve other problems. Such a technique is called bibliotherapy and is based on the concept of reader identification with the problems and personalities of these characters. Through identification and involvement the reader may be able to gain insight into his own problems and find a solution. Many teenage girls seem to engage in bibliotherapy instinctively as they read one romantic novel after another. Because they are worried about boys and dating, they choose to read about how other girls cope with the situation. Boys, too, may utilize books for this purpose. They look for stories about overcoming cowardice or learning to show good sportsmanship. Bibliotherapy can be particularly effective in helping teenagers to solve their problems because it is privately accomplished. No one tells the adolescent what he should



do; he figures it out for himself and takes action. He can preserve his independence.

Bibliotherapeutic techniques, however, may prove hard to handle. Because they derive their power from the interplay of the teenager, his personal problems, and books which concentrate on those problems, there is a certain amount of difficulty in maintaining balance. It may be that the teenager does not want to recognize, even indirectly, that he has problems. He may never be able to see how he might use the character's answers in his own environment. Or he may simply become convinced that what he thought was a small problem is really a big one.

If you choose to use bibliotherapy, essentially all that can be done is to make books available. One indirect method of doing so might be to provide a book ostensibly for one child with the hope that its real target will find and read it. Generally the teenager who has a particular problem will search out the book that answers his need. You must remember however,



that the more serious and painful the problem, the more subtle you must be. If your efforts are too obvious, the teenager will retreat to protect himself. But if approached with sensitivity, bibliotherapy can be a way to reach an otherwise unreachable adolescent.

Another very effective motivational technique, and one that improves parent-teen relations as well, is discussion. Reading materials are always more interesting if a reader can defend, tear down, or discuss what the writers had to say. Newspapers and magazines probably provide the best basis for family discussions, since they are concerned primarily with current events. Those who have not read can still participate, but they will often be at a disadvantage because the information gained from media is incomplete. To better defend his point of view, the teenager will be forced to read new materials.

Discussion as a technique must not be artificially imposed on the family if it is to be successful. The best and most worthwhile exchange of ideas usually grows naturally from mutual interests or concerns. If you do not genuinely care about your

teenager's views, or if you find the topic boring, you will discover that the discussion lacks life and spontaneity. Neither you nor your teenager will be spurred to do further reading or to renew the exchange.

A discussion motivated by a news item or a television program, a discussion which evolves naturally over a leisurely dinner, will be most productive. It encourages the participants to read in order to be convincing, it gives the teenager an opportunity to be treated as an equal, and it helps parents to understand the teenager and to see what he thinks. The value of such discussion is almost limitless.

Another area of reading has yet to be explored—the development of taste in book or magazine selection. Parents often are as bothered by their children's steady diet of "junk" reading as they are when nothing is read. But, in reality, such concern is unnecessary. Most teenagers read a great deal of mediocre literature before they find more provoking books which capture their interest. If you discover your teenager making off with one of your books, fine. But until that time encourage him to read what interests him. Make good books available, but don't criticize him about his taste. The important thing is that he read, constantly adding to his store of knowledge about people and things, constantly sharpening his reading skills so that when he is interested in better literature, he will be able to read it perceptively.

As you try these suggestions, be realistic in expecting results. The speed with which your child's reading interest increases will depend on many things, including his reasons for not reading and the effectiveness of your approach. Lack of immediate success should not deter you from continuing your efforts. If you can spark even a small interest in reading, you will have gone a long way toward the aim of producing an independent lifetime reader.

This ERIC/CRIER + IRA monograph is one of a series designed by the Clearinghouse on Reading to answer for parents questions about their child's reading development.

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Copies of this publication can be ordered from:

**International Reading Association**
**Six Tyre Avenue**
**Newark, Delaware 19711**

## *If you want more information . . .*


**Alm, Richard S., ed.** *Books for You*. New York: Washington Square Press, Inc., 1964.

Categorizes books for high school students according to subject and provides a short summary of each. Available in paperback.

**Carlson, G. Robert.** *Books and the Teenage Reader*. New York: Harper and Row, 1967.

Provides an excellent discussion of the interaction of the adolescent with various types of reading materials and includes several reading lists as well as motivational techniques.

**Eastman, Arthur.** "After Literacy," *English for the Junior High Years*, ed. Stephen Dunning. Champaign, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1969.

Suggests that adolescents progress from literacy through literature to growth and points out the futility of forcing "good literature" on teenagers before they are ready for it. Available in paperback.

**Fader, Daniel N. and McNeil, Elton B.** *Hooked on Books: Program and Proof*. New York: Berkley Medallion Books, 1968.

Provides an eye-opening study of teenage reading when books can be chosen freely and includes a reading list of 1000 popular paperback books. Available in paperback.

**Karlin, Robert.** "A Look at the Adolescent" and "The Interest to Read," *Teaching Reading in High School*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1964.

Discusses the needs of adolescents, their reading interests and attitudes, and ways to encourage reading in a book intended for teachers but useful for parents, too.

**Solomon, Doris, comp.** *Best Books for Children*. New York: R.R. Bowker Company, 1970.

Contains several book lists, each for a particular grade level, and divides the books according to subject matter. Each book is described and publishing information is included.

**Spache, George D.** *Good Reading for Poor Readers*. Champaign, Illinois: The Garrard Press, 1968.

Lists an extensive number of books enjoyed by poor readers and provides an excellent discussion of bibliotherapy, as well as ways of choosing books for children.

**Strang, Ruth.** *Helping Your Child Improve His Reading.* New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, Inc., 1962.

Describes the parents' role in helping or hindering their children's reading and contains one section which explores the relationship of teenagers and reading.

**Thomison, Dennis, ed.** *Readings about Adolescent Literature.* Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1970.

Includes many short and perceptive articles by various authors on adolescents, their reading materials, and the problems encountered with adolescent literature.

**Walker, Elinor, comp.** *Book Bait.* Chicago: American Library Assocaition, 1969.

Summarizes the plots of many adult and teenage books, notes which teenagers like particular books, and suggests other titles which might be enjoyed by an adolescent who found the book interesting.

**Walker, Elinor,** *et al. Doors to More Mature Reading.* Chicago: American Library Association, 1964.

Follows the same format as *Book Bait*, but reviews primarily books which would be appropriate for the older teenager.

## Some questions for thought and discussion

What kind of early childhood experiences seem to contribute to a child's interest or lack of interest in reading?

How do the attitudes that parents maintain toward their teenager affect parents' success in encouraging good reading habits?

How can the parent help create the proper environment and atmosphere in the home to encourage reading? What materials and other resources can a parent provide? How can he set a sincere example?

What activities bid for a teenager's time–at home, at school, elsewhere? How might a reading habit be developed in relation to these activities?

What is a sensible course of action for the parent who knows that his teenager's ability to read is severely impaired?

What kind of teenage problems could best be solved through bibliotherapy? How does a parent decide what reading materials are appropriate for a specific teenage problem?

What facilities are available in your schools or community for the teenager who wants professional help in developing his reading skills?

What is a reasonable goal for a parent to have for improving his teenager's reading?